DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 803 SP 029 000

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TITLE Using Assertive Discipline.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of School Psychologists (New Orleans, LA, March 4-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Assertiveness; Behavior Modification; *Classroom Techniques; Corporal Punishment; *Discipline; *Discipline Problems; Elementary Education; *Program Development; *Student Behavior; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Student Relationship; Token Economy
IDENTIFIERS *Assertive Discipline

ABSTRACT

Assertive Discipline (AD) is a modified version of assertion training skills. It is a systematic combination of verbal assertiveness training combined with teachers using everyday rewards and punishments to positively influence relationships and students' behavior. When using the AD model, the teacher must: (1) clearly convey their rules and actions for compliance and noncompliance; (2) make a discipline plan for all students and explain the plan verbally, warning students of their limits; and (3) make nondirective statements, ask questions, and make directive statements before confronting the student with a demand either to behave or choose to be punished. Punishments such as withholding privileges or staying after school are used, while rewards are free time or positive notes given for appropriate behaviors. Systematic dismissal is used for severe and recurring violations. This paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of various means of discipline (e.g., corporal punishment, token economy), and describes how teachers are trained to use AD. A description is given of the implementation of the Assertive Discipline Program at Morgan County Primary School (Georgia), a public school with 52 teachers serving more than 840 students in kindergarten through grade three. An evaluation of the program's success is presented. References are included. (JD)

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Using Assertive Discipline

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Paper presented at The National Association of School Psychologists Annual Convention, March 4-8, 1987, New Orleans, Louisiana.

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Introduction

Yesterday, Tim was sent to the principal's office for stabbing another student with a pencil. The day before, he kicked a student during recess and threatened to harm her if she reported the incident to their teacher. Today, he is in the office again, for calling his teacher a "dumb bunny" and refusing to sit in the corner.

These are just a few of Tim's offenses during this school year. Tim's teacher has tried various methods of discipline, including positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior, using a time-out chair, making him write sentences, and conferences with his parents; none of these methods have helped Tim to maintain control during class. The teacher is at a loss because far too much time is spent disciplining Tim, with valuable instructional time lost because of continuous inappropriate behavior. What can be done to help Tim? Is there hope that he will begin to exhibit appropriate behavior?

The events described indicate that Tim is a discipline concern of his teachers and his principal. Although such events are not uncommon in a school setting, it is uncommon that Tim continues to be an offender despite discipline efforts. This paper discusses the topic of discipline and presents the results of one method used to address the problems caused by inappropriate behavior.

Background

Broadly speaking, discipline is the matter of learning how to behave. Making decisions regarding appropriate reponses to behavioral incidents is an on-going part of being an educator (Kohut, 1978).

Discipline problems are present at most levels of teaching and instruction, and their causes are many. Contributing circumstances include poorly structured classroom situations, teacher inexperience, lack of supervision during activities, home environments that are overly permissive, lack of student skills for appropriate socialization, and student disregard for authority.

Corporal punishment is one method that has been tried to curtail the incidence of behavioral disruptions. In forty-six states, strappings, paddlings, and other forms of corporal punishment are still used as ways to control behavior (Davidson, 1980). The public school is the only major institution in American society that does not have regulation against the use of corporal punishment as an officially approved method for behavior control (Davidson, 1980).

According to Ellenburg and Dominy (1978), psychologists have reported that punishment often increases the aggressiveness and defiance of children, and often serves to drive problems underground rather than solve them. Punishing an undesired behavior by spanking does not insure nonrecurrence of the behavior; this assurance can only come

after the reason or catalyst for the behavior has been identified and, where appropriate, discussed. Still, debate over the use of paddling continues, with proponents pointing out that there are students who are capable of responding to little else than corporal punishment (George, 1980).

The National Education Association has developed a series of discipline approaches which, as Davidson (1980) notes, offer no guarantee of immediate success but are alternatives to corporal punishment. The program presents short range solutions which include:

1) Quiet places where disruptive students can regain composure;
2) Student-teacher agreements on immediate alternatives;
3) Teaming of adults to talk privately with disruptive students until stablility returns;
4) Provision of alternative experiences for student who are bored, turned off, or otherwise unreceptive to a particular area or experience;
5) Bestowing or withdrawing privileges; and
6) Class participation and discussion on the need for good behavior and the consequences of good or bad behavior.

George (1980) stated that when the aim of classroom discipline goes beyond control and is seen as a potentially

valuable educational experience, it becomes an ideal source of growth, producing teacher-student interaction. There is a need for every teacher to construct a lesson plan for classroom discipline, and there are simple steps that teachers can take to develop these plans (Kelley, 1978). Kelley presented nine principles and procedures that result in a more effective discipline environment. Factors such as a sense of timing, a sense of fairness, a commitment to the modeling of democratic behaviors, openness to student feedback, and self-confidence are primary determinants of the success of any disciplinary practice in a classroom setting.

Requesting feedback from students is one way that teachers can bridge the gaps that may exist between them and their students. Rebbeck (1986) consulted her eighth grade students and asked them to list the traits they believed teachers should posess. The resulting tips for teachers were:

1) Don't be mean;
2) Don't be over-confident;
3) Don't be a ditto-server;
4) Teach something;
5) Don't assign extra work to students who finish early;
6) Be versatile;
7) Don't yell;
8) Be patient;

9) Don't give up on students;

10) Let students go to the restroom;

11) Be supportive and reassuring;

12) Have a sense of humor;

13) Don't leave the classroom;

14) Correct papers and make comments;

15) Dress neatly and stay young;

16) Don't complain;

17) Don't have favorites;

18) Use books;

19) Don't be too intelligent;

20) Be qualified in your subject area; and

21) Walk around and check on students while they work.

Furthermore, an additional way to increase desired behaviors from students, or to encourage them to repeat a behavior, is to praise them for actions with which one is pleased. Praise can be used to help students master basic skills, work harder to reach certain goals and objectives, and overcome extreme cases of poor self-concepts (Curwin, 1980). Although praise is not a way to discipline students, it is a way for teachers to provide students feedback and to designate behaviors they deem important for a successful and effective classroom environment.

However, teachers should exercise caution when using praise, according to Brophy (1980). Praise, he stated, when used improperly or when overdone, can become a controlling

mechanism and a constraint on motivation, creativity, or independent thinking.

Another way to increase appropriate academic and social behaviors is to set up a token economy system. A token economy system is a contingency package which should be used when reinforcers such as grades, praise, or high interest materials do not work well or fail completely (Stephens & Cooper, 1980). The tokens in this system are any tangible items that can be given immediately following responses and then exchanged later for known reinforcers.

The challenge for educators using the token economy is to find reinforcers that the students would like to earn and will work to receive. Some advantages of using the token economy are that tokens provide a concrete symbol that the student has worked appropriately and has done a good job, they encourage students to set goals, and can be given immediately after responses are elicited from the student. However, there are also disadvantages; tokens can be lost or stolen, and such a system is difficult to fade out or remove (Stephens & Cooper, 1980). A token economy system should only be started after all advantages and disadvantages have been taken into account.

Since it is not possible for teachers, administrators, and other supervisory personnel to monitor every activity that goes on in the school setting, it is desirable for students to take some responsibility for their own behavior. Stensrud and Stensrud (1981) stated that such

self-discipline is based on an internal locus of control, and proposed self-discipline as a curriculum area. According to these authors, giving students the right to make rules and decisions that effect their lives will encourage cooperation and self-discipline. The authors further stated that since discipline can be learned, instruction in discipline can greatly influence a person's whole life. Assertive Discipline, developed by Canter and Canter (1976), is viewed as an effective tool to teach such self-discipline and encourage cooperation.

Assertive Discipline (AD) is a modified version of assertion training skills. It is a systematic combination of verbal assertiveness training combined with teachers using the everyday rewards and punishments they have at hand to positively influence relationships and students behaviors (Wolfgang & Glickman, 1986). The Canters believe a teacher has the following rights:

1) The right to establish a classroom structure and routine that provides the optimal learning environment in light of the teacher's own strengths and weaknesses.
2) The right to determine and request appropriate behavior from the students which meets the teacher's needs and encourages the positive social and educational development of the child.

3) The right to ask for help from parents, the principal, etc., when the teacher needs assistance with a child (Canter, 1976).

The premise of the Assertive Discipline model is the right of a teacher to teach and the right of a teacher to expect students to obey. Both the students' and the teacher's wants and needs must be met in a way that does not violate the wants and needs of the other. According to AD, a teacher must clearly convey his/her rules and actions for compliance and noncompliance. He/she must make a discipline plan for all students and explain the plan verbally, warning students of their limits. He/she must make nondirective statements, ask questions, and make directive statements before confronting the student with a demand either to behave or choose to be punished.

Punishments such as withholding privileges or staying after school are used in the program. Rewards such as free time or positive notes are given for appropriate behavior. Severe and reoccurring violations are handled by systematic dismissal of the student to another classroom, the principal, or to the student's home (Wolfgang & Glickman, 1986).

Formative Evaluation

The purpose of the present study was to examine in detail the effects Assertive Discipline as a school-wide disciplinary program was having on the overall school

situation at Morgan County Primary School. Questions that were addressed included:

1) What outcomes had resulted from the Assertive Discipline Program?
2) Had there been a positive effect on teacher morale?
3) Did the program need modifications or additions?
4) What were some problems that existed when the program was initiated?
5) What problems had been effectively addressed since the adoption of the program?

Morgan County Primary School is a public school in Madison, Georgia, which serves over 840 students in kindergarten through grade three. Fifty-two teachers were employed there during the present evaluation; there were eleven kindergarten, ten first grade, eight second grade, and seven third grade classes.

The Assertive Discipline program at Morgan County Primary was initiated during the 1985-86 school year through the financing of a Title VI grant. These funds allowed for textbooks, training films for inservice sessions, and a stipend for teachers who participated. The training sessions included: an introduction explaining why behavior problems occur, guidelines for effective setting of limits, consequences to be utilized with severe behavior problems,

and the way to introduce an Assertive Discipline program into individual classes and an entire school. The discipline competencies discussed in the inservice sessions were as follows:

1) Teachers must know at all times what they want the students to do;
2) Teachers must know how to systematically set limits when the students do not behave properly; and
3) Teachers must know how to systematically reinforce the appropriate behavior of students.

These training and information sessions took place as pre-planning for the faculty. Handouts, videotapes, and small group meetings served as catalysts for brainstorming and idea sharing. During the sessions, the teachers collaborated as a group, and four school rules for students were decided upon:

1) Follow the directions of all school workers;
2) Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourselves;
3) Walk quietly at all times, and
4) No cursing, teasing, or unnecessary tattling.

Participants

In order to determine the best use of the Assertive Discipline program, in the spring of 1986 all 52 teachers at Morgan County Primary were asked to give feedback on the program. The results reported herein represent 100% participation on the part of the teachers.

Methods and Procedures

The instrument used to determine descriptive information on aspects of the AD program was a questionnaire developed by the first author, who served as the internal examiner of the program. The three page questionnaire was divided into four topic areas: Individual Characteristics, About Education in General, Your Class and This School, and the AD program. The questions used in the fourth section were taken from the AD worksheets (Canter, 1976, p.183-184). Only the results of this fourth section are presented in this paper.

The formative evaluation study was introduced to the faculty by the principal during an inservice meeting. Teachers were informed of the purpose of the study and told the information they shared would be kept confidential and used appropriately. They were asked to be candid in their responses and to write as many comments as they deemed appropriate.

The questionnaires were delivered to each of the teachers with a brief explanation concerning comments. Upon

completion, the questionnaires were returned to the internal examiner.

Results

Analysis of the questionnaire responses focused on four topic areas:

1) Was the program well-implemented?
2) Were teachers following the program guidelines?
3) Was the program effective?
4) What effects did the program have on teacher attitudes?

Not all of the teachers responded to every statement on the questionnaire. The percentages reported here refer to the proportion of teachers who responded to a given item.

Results indicated the AD program was well-implemented. Eighty percent of the teachers said that their discipline efforts were well-planned. Thirty percent agreed that they needed more training sessions in order to become better disciplinarians; 58 percent disagreed. A large majority of the teachers (78 percent) agreed that the program needed some modifications, mostly to address "hard-core" offenders. One drawback of the program seemed to be increased paperwork; 54 percent of the teachers indicated that the paperwork was an added chore to their daily routine.

The teachers seemed to be following the guidelines of the program. Ninety-four percent agreed they were assertively communicating to their students the behaviors

they expected from them. Thirty-three percent agreed they sometimes still responded hostilely to negative behaviors, but 98 percent indicated that their responses were generally assertive.

With regard to the effectiveness of the program, 88 percent of the teachers felt their assertive responses help to eliminate inappropriate behaviors on the part of the students. Seventy-two percent observed better student performance and 54 percent indicated greater parent participation since the program was implemented. However, 79 percent of the teachers agreed that there were still problems with student behaviors.

The program also seems to have had a favorable effect on teacher's attitudes toward discipline. Sixty-one percent agreed the program had made a difference in their teaching focus, with 61 percent also agreeing that they had become more positive teachers since its implementation. Of the teachers who disagreed with the latter statement, most indicated they already had a positive attitude.

Conclusions

The results of the present evaluation seem to indicate that the Assertive Discipline program at Morgan County Primary School has made positive contributions to the teachers' approaches to handling inappropriate behaviors. The program has provided teachers with structure by giving them a systematic way to treat discipline problems that they might encounter in their classrooms. Based on the responses

of the teachers, the training sessions were successful, and the program was understood by most of the teachers.

Two areas that need to be addressed in order for the program to become optimally effective are the areas of teacher planning (e.g. activities and reinforcers) and teacher consistency. The teachers must become more expert at stating expectations and carrying through with consequences when those expectations are not met. Many of the teachers stated that consistency was one area that needed modification, not so much as a program modification necessarily, but as a personal one.

It is emphasized that the sequential steps, consequences, and positive reinforcement involved in the program must be strictly adhered to in order for students to internalize expectations. The main premise of the program is that constant positive reinforcement leads to constant appropriate behavior, students have the final responsibility for their own behaviors.

Practical Implications

The success achieved by the Morgan County School System, gives credence to the initiation of a systematic discipline approach such as Assertive Discipline in other school systems. School psychologists, educational psychologists, educators, teachers, and parents need to be cognizant of such an approach in order to intelligently and thoroughly make decisions and give recommendations. Appropriate behavior leads to maximum performance in school

settings and maximum performance is the ultimate goal for all students to strive to attain.

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